

Sermon

October 19, 2014

Title: Egypt or Exodus

Text: Revelation 2-3

Everybody Loves a Good Story

Once Upon a Time...

Everybody loves a good story. And if our world ever needed a good story it is now. It seems that just about everywhere you look, things are falling apart: the Great Recession, endless conflicts, wild weather, Ebola. We can perhaps remember a happier “once upon a time,” but our society is beginning to wonder if there will be a “happily ever after.”

On a dark night over the fields of Bethlehem a messenger from Heaven appeared before a huddle of terrified shepherds. Would he tell a good story or bad story? Would he bring good news or bad news? Would he announce the end of the world or a brand new beginning? The angel came to announce that God had stepped into the world’s story – a story that had gone frightfully wrong – and that He would now make things right once and for all. The baby born that night would lead the entire human race on a New Exodus out of the slavery of sin and death and into God’s New Creation.

Luke 2:10-11 NIV

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

John’s Story:

The Book of Revelation tells this New Exodus story from beginning to end. In fact, John tells the story not once, but multiple times, so that it can become deeply implanted in our hearts and minds.

James Resseguie (James Resseguie, [The Revelation of Saint John: A Narrative Commentary](#)) describes Revelation’s New Exodus Story as being “U shaped.” It begins with a vision of God and the Lamb, providing for us the answer to the question: *Who is God?*

It then descends into the evil and brokenness of our world, showing us how God rescued a people for Himself to be the beginning of His New Creation. It is here that we find the answer to the question: *Who are we?*

It concludes with a vision of the New Heavens and New Earth, thus answering the question: *Where are we going?*

Finding ourselves in God's Story:

Study the way that John tells God's Story and you will find it very familiar. Why? Because it is story you live every day.

Perhaps, for instance, you planted a garden this past spring. When you had finished tilling the ground and planting all those little packets of seeds, the garden was a work of art – just the way it was meant to be. “Once upon a time...”

For awhile all was well. The seeds sprouted in neat rows. You pulled a few weeds, did some watering, and dreamed of a rich harvest. Then you went on that camping trip in the middle of the summer. When you came back, you could hardly believe your eyes! Weeds had sprung up everywhere, obliterating your neat rows. Puny carrot tops struggled for a glimpse of the sun under canopies of invaders. And that meant you faced a choice: to weed or not to weed. Your choice would determine whether you would have a harvest or not.

Isn't that what we face in every area of our lives? We're somewhere in between God's “once upon a time” and His “happily ever after.” Our world is filled with possibilities, but it is also filled with invasive and deadly weeds. The big question facing us is what we will do. Will we dare to believe that God has a “happily ever after” for us and our world? Or will we abandon ourselves and our world to the weeds? Who are we? Are we rusty cogs in a broken down machine? Or are we agents of God's new Life, helping to usher in His New Creation?

Letters to Christians

The First Vision Cycle:

One good way to get a handle on Revelation is to see it as being comprised of six cycles of visions. Each cycle has the same U shaped structure, beginning in Heaven, descending to Earth, and returning victoriously to Heaven.

We find the first such cycle in Revelation 1-3. It begins with John being “in the Spirit on the Lord's Day” and encountering Jesus in Heaven. What follows are seven letters to seven churches here on Earth. Jesus has a specific message for each of them that addresses the challenges that they face on their New Exodus journey. The cycle concludes by bringing us to Heaven's Throne Room, where the next cycle will begin.

The letters to the churches are in many ways the key to understanding and interpreting the rest of the book. Craig Koester writes:

Those in search of seven-headed monsters may find the messages to the seven churches to be rather tame, yet these chapters are among the most important in the book because they create the context in which the later visions can be understood. They make clear that John's visions do not float freely in heaven, but address issues confronting Christian congregations on earth. By taking the opening chapters seriously, readers can better ask how the visions in the later part of the book address the situations of people engaged in a struggle of faith.

Craig R. Koester, Revelation and the End of All Things, p. 42

These letters speak to the reality of being a follower of Jesus in this life and in this world.

The U Shaped Plot:

Each of the seven letters follows the same format:

- It begins with a description of Jesus speaking from Heaven.
- It addresses a specific challenge that this specific church is facing.
- It commands the congregation to take remedial action.
- It ends by promising those who “overcome” a blessing in the New Heavens and Earth.

At the heart of each letter is a challenge facing the church to which it is addressed. Here is the thing that the Christians must overcome if they are to continue on God's New Exodus Journey.

- Three of the churches – Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira – faced the challenge of **assimilation** to the prevailing pagan culture. Ephesus had reacted to false teachings in this regard that compromised their ability to show God's love. The other two churches tolerated teachings that permitted participation in pagan sacrifices through the eating of meat that had been offered in pagan temples.
- Two of the churches – Smyrna and Philadelphia – faced the challenge of **persecution**. In its earliest years, Christianity was seen as a part of Judaism, and enjoyed the same protections that Jews enjoyed in the Roman Empire. But by John's time Christians found themselves denounced by their Jewish neighbors, and lost these protections.
- Two of the churches – Sardis and Laodicea – faced the challenge of **complacency**. As we saw a moment ago in the letter to Laodicea, they had become “lukewarm.” They weren't suffering under persecution. Nor were they struggling with overt forms of paganism. Instead, they had become comfortable in the here and now, and had lost their focus on the New Exodus Journey.

The challenge is the most important part of the letter. It defines a make or break moment in the lives of Christians and their church. Get this one thing right, and they move forward into God's New Creation. Get it wrong and you can turn off the lights.

The Letter to the Church in Laodicea:

Look, for example, at the final letter, the letter to the church in Laodicea. The letter begins at the top of the U with Jesus speaking from Heaven:

Revelation 3:14 The Message

¹⁴ Write to Laodicea, to the Angel of the church. God's Yes, the Faithful and Accurate Witness, the First of God's creation, says:

It descends down the U with Jesus' diagnosis of what is wrong with this church:

Revelation 3:15-17 The Message

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ "I know you inside and out, and find little to my liking. You're not cold, you're not hot—far better to be either cold or hot! You're stale. You're stagnant. You make me want to vomit. You brag, 'I'm rich, I've got it made, I need nothing from anyone,' oblivious that in fact you're a pitiful, blind beggar, threadbare and homeless.

At the bottom of the U Jesus spells out what the Laodiceans need to do to reverse course from their downward path:

¹⁸ "Here's what I want you to do: Buy your gold from me, gold that's been through the refiner's fire. Then you'll be rich. Buy your clothes from me, clothes designed in Heaven. You've gone around half-naked long enough. And buy medicine for your eyes from me so you can see, really see.

¹⁹ "The people I love, I call to account—prod and correct and guide so that they'll live at their best. Up on your feet, then! About face! Run after God!

Finally, if they make the right choices and take the right actions, they will turn the corner and make the journey to God's Promised Land. And just as God was with Israel on her Exodus, He will be with his church as she travels through this world.

²⁰⁻²¹ "Look at me. I stand at the door. I knock. If you hear me call and open the door, I'll come right in and sit down to supper with you. Conquerors will sit alongside me at the head table, just as I, having conquered, took the place of honor at the side of my Father. That's my gift to the conquerors!

Egypt or Exodus?

A Crisis Moment!

John makes it clear that each of these congregations of Christians was facing a crisis, make or break, moment in its Exodus Journey. Like the Israelites of old, they would have to decide whether they wanted to go on with their Exodus or go back to Egypt. This is *the central message* of the Book of Revelation. Will we choose Egypt or Exodus? Our next actions make all the difference.

Remember the example of the garden? Some gardeners find themselves waging war against a whole scale invasion of insects or disease. If they don't take action immediately to fight off the invaders, the garden will be lost. Other gardeners are tempted to just let the weeds do their thing. Why discriminate against them? Let them grow. They aren't that bad. But as the season progresses, the weeds choke out everything else. Others lose interest in the whole project. They sit back thinking that because they planted and fertilized the ground last spring everything will be just fine. They are overly complacent.

In each case, if the garden is to produce a harvest, something has to change, and fast!

Egypt or Exodus?

Each of us faces the same challenges that threatened John's seven churches.

- Some of us find ourselves dealing with overt opposition to our faith. It may come from family and friends; it may occur in the workplace. Our challenge: to find a way to move forward in our faith in Jesus.
- Some of us find ourselves tempted to go along with an ever more decaying culture. We face the challenge of standing against the worship of anything other than the true Creator of Heaven and Earth.
- Some of us have become complacent. We believe all the right things. We are not tempted to go after false gods. Life is good, or at least "good enough." We face the challenge of failing to get off the couch so that we can move forward on God's New Exodus Journey.

Choosing God's New Exodus means allowing Him to show us what has to happen right now in order to move us forward.

Egypt or Exodus: it's your choice. Jesus has set us free to take the journey. God's Holy Spirit lights the way. We are no longer doomed to sink deeper and deeper into the brokenness of the world. God has opened the door to the path ahead. Now it's up to you.

Small Group Time:

In the Seven Letters to the Churches John identifies three major challenges that must be overcome if the believers are to continue on the New Exodus Journey.

- Assimilation: conforming to the pagan culture
- Persecution: suffering for faith in Jesus
- Complacency: being too comfortable to make the journey to follow Jesus fully

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is the biggest challenge that you face in your life right now?
2. What's the hardest part of facing this challenge when it comes to your trust in Jesus?
3. Which of John's three challenges is most prominent in this situation?
4. What would be the "easy way out"?
5. Take a few minutes to look at Jesus' solution to the challenge you are facing:
 - a. Assimilation/conformity: Rev. 2:14-16 and Rev. 2:24-25
 - b. Persecution: Rev. 2:10 and Rev. 3:8-1
 - c. Complacency: Rev. 3:2-3 and Rev. 3:18-20
6. What would Jesus' solution look like in your situation?

Prayer Time: Break up into groups of 2-3 for a time of prayer.

Next week: Revelation 4-7!